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AMY BASS

The Art of the Mash-up: Students in the Age of Digital Reproduction

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THE COLLEGE OF NEW ROCHELLE

History has never had a convenient mechanism of organization. The measurement of time we call the decade, unfortunately, does not work. The sixties, for example, in many ways began in 1955 with the Montgomery Bus Boycotts, and in other ways began in 1963 with the assassination of President John F. Kennedy. They did not end on December 31, 1969, as we would have liked them to, because the Black Panthers and the Radical Feminists, as well as many others with sixties sensibilities, would have much to say going into the 1970s. Further, few could question the fact that the greed that personified the 1980s remained solely in that decade, or that only the 1920s “roared.”

Thus, historians, particularly cultural historians, tend to rely on chronology far less than others likely think we should. And because of that, we generally hate to personify the character of a generation, making for a tricky task of defining historical trends while avoiding vulgar generalizations. However, it is a worthy endeavor, for how else to explain the election of Richard Milhouse Nixon in the visibly revolutionary year of 1968? It also proves useful when responding to Joan Digby’s argument that the eighteenth century was an Age of Imitation, considering that the nineteenth century cultural landscape was dominated by the art of minstrelsy, likely the most imitative of performative styles and the forerunner of “mechanical reproduction,” as phrased by Walter Benjamin.¹ Indeed, as cultural critics from the Frankfurt School to Benedict Anderson have theorized, the twentieth century is not so much an age of imitation, but rather a continuation of the reproduction of *representations* of reality that now permeate our postmodern sensibilities. To specify that any particular age is of particular imitation, and thus that our students follow suit, is to believe that there is an age of authenticity somewhere out there, or an “*our* culture” in the words of Digby, something that postmodern critique has dispelled and that globalization has rendered obsolete.

I am new at the honors thing – I am the first to admit this. I took the reins of a once-glorious Honors Program in the fall of 2003, becoming its fourth director in

¹ Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” in *Illuminations* (New York: Schocken, 1969). Of its relationship to periodization, Benjamin writes, “Even the most perfect reproduction of a work of art is lacking in one element: its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be. This unique existence of the work of art determined the history to which it was subject throughout the time of its existence.”

THE ART OF THE MASH-UP

four years. The senior class had but three students left in it from the 15 that had entered four years previously. The juniors were weary, the sophomores were wary, and the freshmen were too busy unpacking to notice much. But with open arms they welcomed me, taught me, talked with me, and learned from me. I studied the history of the Program with them, discussed what worked and what was no longer working, and put it all back together in a year's time. Because of this process, I quickly grew to know this set of students – honors students – in a way I had known none before. I learned of their curricular desires, their social needs, the rhythms of their academic goals. They helped me better and stabilize the Honors Program, but in the process they gave me an unparalleled view into their lives. As it happened, I was teaching my seminar on youth culture concurrently with this process and, thus, I took notes.

If I had to generalize about what marked these students, I would say they lived in an age of immediacy, a time when the speed with which stocks are traded can crush the global economic system; travel can be booked from your living room and your boarding pass printed before you pack your suitcase; and students can “instant message” each other in class, crib an entire paper from a Google search, and demand an instant response from your own email account in the wee hours of the morning. With this immediacy come a large worldview and a terribly independent culture under the umbrella of global corporate dominance, dependent largely on what we could call, to reword Benjamin, the Age of *Digital* Reproduction. Students “blog” their feelings to the wired world, reinstating the art of journal writing in a public way, revealing high stress levels (jobs, family, school) with fewer words, as children of the internet age allegedly have significantly thinner vocabularies. They craft underground musical culture via the process of downloading, ensuring that while *Billboard* heralds Usher or Britney Spears as top-sellers, college students bestow success upon the likes of Modest Mouse and The Postal Service and Hoobastank and Quasimoto years, if ever, before they hit *Billboard*'s radar. They make friends, find partners, and join organizations on Craig's List, extending their social circle from the confines of campus to the entire online community.

Perhaps most significantly, I have noticed that their political conversations define postmodern realities. They are tremendously well-voiced in a range of issues, particularly those of the global economy, i.e., The World Bank. But rather than argue about *whom* to vote for in any given election, they argue over *whether* to vote at all. Their political identity came of age in a moment of tremendous uncertainty regarding the legitimacy of the system, particularly with the national elections of 2000 and 2004. They have grave doubts, as perhaps we all should, over whether it really matters who sits in the Oval Office, and they seem to prefer to conceptualize change at a global, albeit grassroots, level rather than a national one. They wonder about the idea of role models, particularly in terms of the ethics of the most powerful and “successful” in the contemporary moment: “Will Ken Lay ever go to jail?” one wondered in my “Race and Ethnicity” seminar last fall, following a discussion of the racial unbalance in America's prisons.

So where does that leave us? Perhaps rather than considering our students as imitators, we should make a distinction that borrows a framework from the evolution of rock and roll as the predominant commercial musical form, speaking a language

AMY BASS

that students could perhaps embrace. While Pat Boone “covered” and “whitened” rhythm and blues artists such as Fats Domino to carve corporate success in the music industry in the 1950s, becoming the exemplar of musical *imitation*, others, like Elvis Presley and Chuck Berry, stylized something new, becoming the archetypes of musical *innovation*. Thus, rather than seeing our students as those who *sample*, as Digby put it, we should see them as those who *appropriate*, ones who borrow, as so many have done before them, to create something of their own. Rather than the act of imitating, then, let us consider the art of the mash-up, a musical form in which a vocal track from one song is superimposed on the instrumental track of another via computer, bringing together the diverse sounds, audiences, genres, and decades of Destiny’s Child’s “Bootylicious” with Nirvana’s “Smells Like Teen Spirit”; Missy Elliott’s “Get Ur Freak On” with Joy Division’s “Love Will Tear Us Apart”; or—and this may be my favorite—Eminem’s “The Way I Am” with a remix of the theme song from “Bob the Builder.” This classically bootlegged culture is created by students with powerful computers who have challenged and changed ideas of originality, ownership, and, indeed, (and in a very Foucaultian manner, might I add) the very idea of author. The mash-up represents a moment in which *everyone* is the creator, but only those in the know are the audience, as it is creation that purposefully remains open only to those who look for it. As faculty, then, we have to look for it, and when we do, we are rewarded.

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